

## Ralph's Jazz

I have been around jazz my whole life. I remember seeing my dad's jazz cds as a child and hearing him play them in his truck. It always amazed me at how many he actually had. He would always tell me the name of the artists (as if it meant anything to me at the time). As we continued to listen, he would always say "This is cool". The first few times I wasn't exactly impressed but, it grew on me. Upon getting older, I would try to find the songs online so I could put them on my mp3 player but I had no luck there. I also found myself greatly enjoying the jazz radio station and would often turn to it when riding in the car with my mom or while eating dinner. Initially, this shocked my Dad and he asked why I did it, to which I responded: "It sounds cool" As I got even older I started to listen to rap and hip hop music and soon found an artist named Nujabes (whom I am listening to as I type this) who combined jazz *and* hip hop together so of course I was sold. This brings me to another artist but an artist of "the pen": Ralph Ellison. His book "Living with Music" took my interest as he writes about jazz through his own eyes. Seeing things through someone else's eyes has always been an interest of mine, especially when I can relate to the topic. This is why I believe Ellison's works will be especially interesting.

I began with the title essay "Living with Music" I was immediately drawn to it because it was the name of the collection and, because it was a phrase I could definitely relate to. One of the things that immediately stuck out to me in this piece were Ellison's alliterations. Alliterations always "paint a picture" in one's mind but in the case of Ellison one might say the picture is painted in the reader's ears. This is because practically all of them relate directly to music. His first one reads "like the fate ""motif"" in Beethoven's Fifth". As you may or may not know, this song is often used to signify pure tragedy and truly shocking events. The dramatic blaring

instruments convey this feeling perfectly. Ellison goes on to discuss his childhood and specifically - his trumpet playing as a child. While it seems he has no issue critiquing himself, I found these areas to be quite entertaining. He talks of playing “Reveille” in the mornings and “Taps” at night - appropriately. However, his renditions would most likely be frowned upon by the original artist. He continues to talk about his playing and how bad it was and I appreciated the honesty of these passages. I also appreciated Ellison’s language throughout this essay. While there is little to no actual dialogue within the piece, it feels very conversational. While Ellison is not using any slang, his facts were very plainly laid out. In this essay we also see how he made the transition from trumpet player to writer. I found this to be very interesting as well. Ellison’s language in this essay is very clear and easy to follow. The average reader will enjoy it for the information value while someone who actually plays/played an instrument will definitely be able to relate to the struggles of just starting out with an instrument and knowing what something is supposed to sound like- but not being able to replicate it. While the piece is very informational, it did not come across as “boring information”. The vocabulary is simple and easy to follow yet, at the same time complex. Simple words and sentences are used to convey complex ideas throughout the piece.

Next, I came to the essay entitled “On Bird. Bird-Watching and Jazz”. While this essay is not the very next one after “Living With Music” chronologically, I was drawn to it. This was due to the title of the piece. As I read it, I wondered if Ellison would find a way to connect literal bird-watching to jazz music - and he did in a way. He compares Charlie Parker’s style of jazz to the behavior of birds like the catbird and brown thrasher who are known as “mimic thrushes”. He says these birds “take off on the songs of other birds, inflating, inverting and turning them wrong

side out.” (Ellison 68) Furthermore. I learned that “Bird” was actually a nickname for Parker himself. This early critique made me think the piece would actually *not* praise Parker.. Overall, the tone in this one was very passive aggressive. Ellison praises Parker for his innovations yet, feels the need to dwell on his shortcomings as well. This struck me as odd as in one portion Ellison writes “For all the revolutionary ardor of his style...his wide reputation rests as much upon his entertaining personality as upon his gifted musicianship” (Ellison 70) in one portion of the essay and later uses words such as “clown”, “hypocrite” “primitive” and “self destructive” to describe him in others. This led me to wonder if Ellison is praising Parker or dishonoring him. While he does say “According to his witnesses..” (Ellison 74) before going into actual examples of his hypocritical behavior, he does not seem forgiving of it. Perhaps the reference to the witnesses was to give the reader the sense of “these are their words not mine”. Ellison continues to reference outside sources as if he is afraid to own up to his true opinions of Parker. He concludes by continuing with the theme of actual birds, calling Parker a robin who takes on the role of a “hero-victim” Perhaps this final description shows us that Ellison has acknowledged both sides of his Parker’s career and realizes the impact he had on both the music world and his impact on the social world.

The next essay, “Blues People” actually includes a disclaimer of sorts. It tells us that this piece will not be like the others in the collection and that Ellison is “strongly dissenting” (O’Meally 120) Of course when I read this I expected Ellison to be especially critical and he was - but not in the way I anticipated. Rather than being critical he just makes connections that are truthful and fact based. They make the reader think and reconsider their stance on the actual connection between the origins of blues music and...slavery. As we know blues music is sad, but

*why* is it sad? Who created a genre based on negative emotion? Ellison answers this question for us. He writes “The slave began regarding himself as an enslaved African...his work songs and dance music became the blues and primitive jazz...” (Ellison 125). This simple conclusion comes from Ellison’s observations in Child’s book *An Appeal in Favor of that Class of Americans Called Africans*. Ellison however still seems like he does not support the birth of the movement. He rather prefers what came out of it- an “anti mainstream” form of jazz called “bebop”. He voices his dislike for how the African American was characterized as a “jazzman” and how the white culture stole ideas from it and of course- made more money doing the same thing. It seems he has not forgiven the music world for this act and does not plan on it. However, he never outright says this and instead alludes to it by saying things such as “...Negroes have survived and kept their courage during that long period when many whites assumed, as some still assume, that they were afraid” (Ellison 131)

Lastly, we come to Ellison’s first ever published music essay titled “Flamenco”. Learning it was his first shocked me as I had thought the first one was “Living with Music” - hence why the collection is titled that. Anywho, this is one of Ellison’s shorter pieces and he is much less critical in this one. He opens with a quick and casual story about his encounter with a gypsy whom he discussed “Flamenco” with. He informs her that he has already heard “real flamenco” and this prompts him to laugh with his wife about the “prediction”. This part struck me as odd as he is essentially mocking her form of art - yet music is a form of art as well and he would be quite offended if someone had done it to him. His description of the genre of flamenco however, are much more complimentary. He does not “talk down” to it and draws comparisons of jazz to it naturally. He praises how both genres rely on improvisation saying “...a maximum of individual

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11/28/16

expression, and a democratic rivalry such as a typical jam session; for, like the blues and jazz, it is an art of improvisation..." (Ellison 99). He seems to see the genres as equal, Perhaps this essay is less critical because Ellison had not found his "voice" yet. Perhaps at this stage he was afraid to use harsh criticism so *he* would not be met with harsh criticism. This essay definitely had a much more friendly tone to it compared to the others.

In closing, "Living with Music" is a wonderful collection of music essays. Those familiar with Ellison and/or the world of jazz will love it and those who are unfamiliar with either will enjoy it just as much, He manages to give just enough information on mentioned artists without sounding like a history book. His opinionated descriptions keep the reader interested and his moments of African American history are just as interesting as his critical perspectives. The book is also easy to follow as common language is used throughout without any technical music jargon. Ellison's "Living with Music" is a very important piece of the music essay canon and will continue to be analyzed and studied for years to come.